

GINTARAS - AMBER

V. F. BELIAJUS



Charming Bronė Jameikis of Chicago, Illinois, expert weaver, Lithuanian folk dancer and artist, wearing two strands of amber beads, one "cloudy" strand (upper) and one clear.

What is amber?

The New Twentieth Century Dictionary defines: "AMBER—A hard, semiprecious substance, tasteless and without smell, except when pounded or heated, then it emits a fragrant odor. It is found in alluvial soils or on the seashore, in many places, on the shores of the Baltic in Europe most abundantly. It is a fossil pine resin. Though usually pale yellow or reddish brown and translucent, it is sometimes clouded and quite opaque and is sometimes bluish, greenish or violet. It is highly electrical."

The English name came via the Spaniards from the Arabs who call it "Anbar". Since the hoary past the Arabs cherished the amber and a search and commerce for it went on for many centuries even before the Christian era. Even before the Lithuanian people themselves were yet named, whether Aisti, Pruteni, Litua or the various other appellations attributed to the ancient inhabitants of "Baltia" shores, as Plinius (c. A. D. 23-79; Roman naturalist) first mentions it. Of that alone we can gather that Lithuanians lived in that region even then, for "Baltas" is the Lithuanian word for "White" which remained the same for the Baltic Sea for thousands of years. However, that region had already an affectionate name thousands of years ago by the ancient Greeks, Arabs and others. To them it was "The Land of Northern Gold", for to them, the Amber was the gold found in the north, and the best northern gold according to all authorities, comes from the Lithuanian-Baltic shores. The only amber considered "succinite".

Thales of Miletus, a Greek physical philosopher who lived between 640-540 before the Christian Era was the first one to record the electrical charge by friction and to this day it is considered as an excellent insulator for electrical apparatus.

Amber has many other uses besides its property as a semi-precious jewel of which we will speak later. Oils and lacquers are made from it. But of greater importance to geologists and historians were the enclosures found in amber. Flies, bugs and various forms of vegetation are

often found encased and well preserved which give researchers excellent knowledge regarding the flora and fauna of centuries ago.

It is believed the Baltic was once a dense forest as was much of Lithuania till a dozen years ago. After the glacial period as the Baltic was formed, the resins from the many pines hardened and incased within them, during that process, whatever came in its way. Now, these particular ambers are especially prized by the Amber lovers who make pendants and rings with the enclosure as a focal point of attraction. Many believed in its curative powers and mystical charms and the easing of pain during childbirth.

Since the Baltic is on the Western boundary of Lithuania, the ancient people were wont to say that Mother Sun was so unwilling to leave Lietuva and her children behind that she lingered longer in the ambers on the Baltic seashore. The Lithuanian love for the Gintaras (amber) reaches almost proportions of worship. It is the national jewel which bedecks the maiden fair and matron as well. It is cherished and handed down as heirlooms. Many other objects were made of amber. Because of its pliability engravings and statuettes were carved, cuff links, crosses, chessmen, cigarette holders and hundreds of other items.

The Lithuanians are an imaginative and romantic people, as their stories and folk songs will indicate. To the ancient Lithuanian there was no such thing as an object coming into being without some previous reason, deed or misdeed. And the following legend is what they have to say about their beloved Gintaras.



JURATE AND KASTYTIS

(Yoo-rah-teh, Kahs-tee-tis)
"The Origin of Amber"

Senai, senai, labai senai... Long ago, long ago, so very long ago, mighty Perkunas, the God of Thunder, ruler of all the Gods and the Viespatys (sovereign ruler) over all the people, presented the waters of the Baltic to his daughter Juratė to rule over as her domain. Juratė was the consort of Dievsvietis, who was the god-king of the oceans while she was the queen of the Baltic. She lived in a magnificent palace deep under the blue waters of the Baltic. The walls were made of the purest milk-white amber; the threshold of amber of the color of shining gold, the floors of amber like the color of bronze, the window panes of diamonds while the roof of sea shells with fish scales and studded with pearls.

One day Juratė sent all the pikes with messages to summon all the nymphs and mermaids as far as the Jura (a river in central Žemaitija - Samogitia) for a counsel at her amber palace. When all the subjects were present the Queen of the Baltic thus addressed them.

"Dear little sisters, dear little friends, dear little playmates of mine, you are well aware that the father of mine, Praamžis (Ever-lasting Perkunas), the Lord of Haven, the Earth and the seas, has given unto me the Baltic waters to reign over them. Not the smallest minnow or tiniest worm has had any cause for complaint. No one dared to take anyone's life and all has been peace and happiness in my domain. But now I hear the distressing news that an audacious fisherman, Kastytis by name, from the borders of my domain where the Šventoji River yields its homage, has dared to disturb our universal peace and order. He is casting nets around Palanga destroying our friends, the fish, imprisoning them in his nets and killing them. I myself would not presume to catch a single fish, even the flounders to which I am very partial, I eat only the half and cast the other half into the sea again. (This is to explain the crooked shape of the flounders.) What say you, how shall this bold youth be punished?"

"Boats await us, dear sisters, dear friends, let us sail to the shores of the Šventoji. He is casting his net at this moment. We will lure him to the bottom of the sea with our singing and dancing and smother him in our embraces, and his beautiful eyes which now bewitch all the maidens of the Žemaitija we will blind with sand and seaweed."

Juratė and her court set out in a hundred boats of purest white amber and purple silk sails for the mouth of the Šventoji River where Kastytis was at that moment mending his nets, to mete out their cruel revenge.



The goddess Juratė and sirens embark ashore to enchant the fisher-youth Kastytis in order to get him down below the sea. This drawing was made by Louis Denov about whom see elsewhere in this issue.

Bewitching and enchanting was the song of Juratė and her mermaids. The pine forests of deep verdure vibrated with the echoes of their song. From the distance they beheld their foe, Kastytis, young as the new clover in bloom (Dobilėlis), handsome as the rising sun (Saulėlė beaustant), sturdy as the well grown oak (Ąžuolėlis). High was his white forehead, curly was his flaxen hair, deep blue like the waters of the Baltic were his eyes. With content in his heart and a song on his lips he pursued his mending.

Kastytis heard the enticing song. Raising his eyes he discovered the hundred of glittering boats manned by hundreds of maidens rowing amber oars. Every siren of entrancing beauty, but amongst them was one of unsurpassing pulchritude with crown on head and a sceptre of amber in her white hand, Juratė, the Queen and Goddess of the Baltic.

Slowly the boats put to shore and the mermaids alighted. Holding each other by the hand they encircled the unsuspecting youth. They began a slow and rhythmic dance, accompanied by their song. Kastytis was astounded by the sight. Juratė, the most stately of the all, fascinated him. He could not take his eyes off her. She exerted a hypnotic power over him. At last, bewitched by her treacherous charms, Kastytis rises and would throw himself into the arms of the goddess, but the Queen gave a signal to cease the dance.

Juratė was about to speak and tell Kastytis the terrible punishment that was to be meted to him. But the words stuck in her throat, for the youth and proud beauty of Kastytis made her want to gather him in her arms. She had not the heart to consider Kastytis her enemy. After a long moment of silence she said,

"Halt, thou thoughtless youth. Thy sin is great indeed and thou deserves the severest punishment. Cruelly and wantonly hast thou caused the death of many of my friends and subjects, the fish. But thy youth and thy beauty have appeased my anger. I will commute thy punishment and forgive thee on one condition—if thou wilt swear to love, to be mine and mine only. In my arms thou shalt find happiness and misdeeds will be forgotten. But shouldst thou refuse the love of Queen Juratė, thy destruction is assured. Choose then!"

Kastytis, already under her spell, needed no urging. The youth knelt and uttered, "Beloved, I cannot believe my good fortune." He vowed he would love her forever. With an imperious gesture, Juratė waved her retainers away and enfolded the young Kastytis in her arms.

"Now thou art mine forever. Every evening wilt I come sailing to thee, and meet thee on this hill which shall be called after thee." She then stretched out her sceptre, the oars splashed and she vanished.

Thereupon, for a year following, every evening at sundown the Queen of the Baltic would alight on the sands from her boat of pearl and amber with the purple sails of silk, where Kastytis was already waiting; every morning she would return to her amber palace below the waves

of the Baltic, sad at heart because she could not have Kastytis always at her side.

But such happiness could not last. A jealous nymph, who envied Juratė her incomparable beauty, left the palace secretly to report to Perkunas that his daughter had committed the unpardonable sin of falling love with a mortal. Perkunas, unwilling to believe the report, sent trustworthy messengers to see if the nymph has spoken the truth. Alas, it was the truth; every evening Juratė kept tryst on the beach with Kastytis—every morning she unfurled sail and returned.

Perkunas was of exceeding wrath that a goddess should love a mortal. Juratė had just returned from a night with her lover. She reclined upon the pearl couch dreaming of her beloved Kastytis when Perkunas flung a flash of lightning from the clouds which cleft the waves of the Baltic. He unleashed the tempests and caused great storms to arise. Black clouds gathered, the waters became turbid and dark. The whole sea was seething whirlpool. Amid this howling storm a terrible thunderbolt struck the Queen's palace of amber, killing her and shattering the palace into thousands of pieces. The youthful fisherman, Kastytis, was chained by the Eternal One (Praamžis - Perkunas) to a rock at the bottom of the sea, and the body of his beloved Juratė was cast before him. He was eternally compelled with eyes fixed upon her to bemoan his unhappy fate. While the waves carry the fragments of Juratė's palace far and wide.

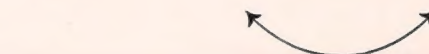
You may still find the fragments of amber if you walk on the white sands of the Baltic shore. The waves will bring pieces of amber, milk-white, the color of gold and of dark bronze, and strew them at your feet. At sundown, or when the sea agitates and the winds are rising, one can still hear the distant moans of the doomed youth, the sorrowful plaint of lost love.

(From the collected Lithuanian legends by Beliajus)



HEAR YE! HEAR YE!

Come this "Merriye of Maye" VILTIS will enter its 13th year of publication, and we plan to celebrate. Many great things are in the offing in form of entertainment and good times. It will be held during the first or second week of May, depending when a suitable hall is available. It may be held in Los Angeles or San Diego, or in both places. By the next issue many details will be announced. Meanwhile, anticipate the anniversary event and plan to be there.



MARCH OF DIMES BY MENLOS AMIGOS

More than 32 folk dance groups were represented at the Menlos Amigos hosted benefit for the March of Dimes, held at Burgess Gym, in Menlo Park, California, January 9th. Clubs from the entire Peninsula, extending from San Francisco to Santa Cruz, co-operated in this affair which was able to turn in more than \$3,000 to the National Infantile Paralysis Foundation. Approximately 400 dancers participated in this effort.

In addition to the general folk and square dancing, an extensive program of entertainment was presented. "Deputy Dave" Allen, KPIX television star, served as master of ceremonies for Miss Judy Hernandez, 10 year old dancer from Palo Alto, who danced two Spanish numbers; Grace Perryman and Virgil Morton danced the Mexican Jarabe Tlaxcalteco, and Mirage Tango; the San Francisco Dance Guild, climaxed the program with Two Horas from Ruthenia.

The traditional American square dances were directed by Sol Rosenstock, Don Newport, and Vera Holleuffer.

Kathleen Weber, Menlo Park, was chairwoman for the Menlos Amigos group, with Virgil Morton, general director.